



Deposited via The University of Leeds.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/211086/>

Version: Accepted Version

Book Section:

Stiebert, J. (2026) Incest and the Hebrew Bible. In: Blyth, C. and Greenough, C., (eds.) T&T Clark Handbook of Sexualities in the Bible and its Reception. T&T Clark Handbooks. T&T Clark, London, pp. 309-324. ISBN: 978-0-5677-1236-3.

<https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567712387>

© Chris Greenough and Caroline Blyth, 2026. This is an author produced version of a book chapter published in T&T Clark Handbook of Sexualities in the Bible and its Reception. Uploaded in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy.

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

Incest and the Hebrew Bible

Johanna Stiebert

Introduction: Incest, trauma and taboo

Words matter and words change perception: one person's 'freedom fighter' and 'spiritual home' are another's 'terrorist' and 'cult'. Translation, too, can make substantial difference: in the case of the Bible, this difference can be life-changing, or even life-ending.¹ This chapter will focus, with primary reference to the Hebrew Bible, on two distinct concepts that are regularly blurred: first, (illegal or taboo) 'incest', and second, (legal or legitimate) 'close-kin union'. I will go on to explain how and why incest is sometimes associated with another illegal sexual taboo, namely child sexual abuse, albeit more clearly in contemporary Western contexts than in biblical accounts. As much as I find these topics distressing and unsettling, I will be examining the amplificatory implications of connecting incest and child sexual abuse with other topics deemed deviant.

In contemporary settings, association between incest and trauma is firmly established. This is due in large part to the work of such pioneering figures as Judith Herman ([1981] 2000), which has gone on to influence trauma-informed examinations of incest and the Bible (e.g. Hudson 1991).² Also significant are survivor accounts, which speak to incest-precipitated trauma, including with reference to the role of biblical texts in this (e.g. Katan 2001). There are now multiple publications exploring both how the Bible suppresses and enables abuse (inclusive of incestuous and other forms of sexual abuse) and how the Bible can bring healing to victim-survivors.³

Important to mention is the marked absence *in the biblical texts* of any acknowledgement of trauma related to incest and close-kin unions. The sole exception here is, arguably, the narrative in 2 Samuel 13, which depicts the aftermath of Amnon's violent rape of his sister Tamar in a way that evokes sympathy and pathos (2 Samuel 13).⁴ Tamar is singular among numerous biblical characters who suffer rape in that the biblical narrator gives voice and expression to what we might call her trauma. Tamar first resists her brother Amnon's sexual demands, expressing horror (2 Sam. 13.12-13) and, after he overpowers and rapes her, performs her distress in vivid and affecting terms (2 Sam. 13.19). The last time she is mentioned, she is called desolate, forlorn (2 Sam. 13.20). We cannot assume this to be either Tamar's or any other woman's personal account of incestuous or close-kin rape, but it offers a rare glimpse, the closest thing in the Hebrew Bible to associating either with emotional distress.

The English term 'incest' is from the Latin *incestus/incestum* ('not chaste/proper'). The definition I used for my monograph on incest in the Hebrew Bible designates it as 'taboo sexual relations with anyone too closely related for marriage to be permissible, or ... the crime resulting therefrom' (Stiebert 2016: 1). As will emerge, I would now adapt the definition and be more circumspect regarding focus on marriageability. The associations of incest with illegality and crime do go some way towards accounting for the horror it so widely arouses. This is powerfully dramatized, for instance, in Sophocles' famous tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, which centres the topic of incest. It is inconsequential in this drama that Oedipus commits maternal incest unwittingly; the absence of intention does nothing to ameliorate his horror and despair at discovering the truth.

As with the word examples at the outset, interpretations concerning incest diverge, and one person's 'incest' is another's 'close-kin union'. Hence, what constitutes illegal or taboo incestuous sex, relationally and culturally speaking, is not constant across human

societies. True, sex between first-degree relatives (i.e. between parent and child, or siblings) is very widely labelled incestuous – but there are exceptions, such as marriages within the royal family of ancient Egypt and the brother–sister marriages in Roman Egypt.⁵ No present-day jurisdictions permit parent-child marriages, and sibling marriages remain very rare and, in every case, carefully circumscribed.⁶

Incest is widely asserted to be a *universal* human taboo,⁷ while inbreeding avoidance has been said to apply also to non-human primates as well as other animal species (Pusey 2004). The two are separate phenomena, with incest constituting a distinctively human *cultural* concept, and inbreeding avoidance a biological *process* that can pertain to humans as well as multiple other animal species. The reason for such taboos is explained variously – psychoanalytically, as resulting from a phylogenetically transmitted Ur-experience;⁸ psychologically, through the Westermarck effect, which pertains to reverse sexual imprinting in response to those familiar from early childhood, who often happen to be family members; and scientifically, as a natural impulse preventing the increased mortality and morbidity associated with inbreeding (Stiebert 2016: 19–44). For all the various, if consistently deep-rooted, reasons for incest taboos, incest persists. The Bible, moreover, offers little towards clearing up any of the confusion – either about why incest continues, in spite of taboo, or how, when or why close-kin unions are to be distinguished from incestuous ones.

Incest and Leviticus

Parts of the Hebrew Bible depict sexual contact between certain related persons as reprehensible and punishable. The closest thing to incest laws are found speckled about, mostly in the Torah.⁹ The fullest examples are in Leviticus 18 and 20. Any connection with marriage is, however, shaky. This, admittedly, is not helped in that there is *no* word in the Hebrew Bible that captures either English ‘marriage’ or ‘incest’.¹⁰

The 'you' of the addressee in Leviticus 18 is masculine singular; most sexual 'targets' are female. This could suggest a presumption of male sexual initiative and of heteronormativity: it is men who approach and who 'uncover nakedness', usually of a female.¹¹ The key expression here that may capture incestuous, taboo sex (given that it applies to persons of the addressee's own 'flesh' and, therefore, most probably those considered close relatives),¹² is *l'gallôt_ 'erwâ*, literally 'to uncover nakedness' (e.g. Lev. 18.6). As L. S. Stone explains, '*erwâ* is *not* a neutral designation of nudity, or an unclothed human being: 'Its simple signification is specifically the genitals, but it is a charged word that could be used as an obscenity. "Exposing" (*glh*) the *rvh* is an idiom for sex, a fact most plainly apparent in the incest prohibitions of Leviticus 18 and 20' (forthcoming; cf. Biale 1984: 177).¹³ Deborah Rooke, too, maintains that the evocative expression 'uncovering nakedness' pertains to incest and that the force of the incest prohibitions is aimed at dispelling once and for all the mistaken idea that a man is entitled to all women in his household (2009: 29).¹⁴

Proscriptions in Leviticus 18 centre on some kind of sexual contact between both consanguines (or blood relatives), and affines (relatives by marriage). The off-limits relatives are as follows: one's father and mother (18.7); one's father's woman/wife¹⁵ (18.8; cf. 20.11 and Deut. 22.30[MT 23.1]; 27.20; Ezek. 22.10); one's sister or half-sister (18.9, 11; 20.17; cf. Deut. 27.22; Ezek. 22.11) and one's sister-in-law (18.16); one's granddaughter (18.10); one's paternal and maternal aunt and paternal uncle's wife (18.12-14; cf. 20.19-20); one's daughter-in-law (18.15; cf. 20.12; Ezek. 22.11); and both a woman and her daughter (cf. 20.14; cf. Deut. 27.23) or grand-daughter (18.17), or both a woman and her sister while both are alive (18.18). Some of these prohibitions may be aimed at ensuring social hierarchy and harmony – uncovering such people's nakedness, it says, can infringe on the rights of another close relative: hence, uncovering one's father's nakedness is an offense to one's mother and

infringes on her nakedness (18.7). In the case of having sex with two sisters, on the other hand, this, it says, can incite rivalry – so, the reason for this law seems to be maintaining social equilibrium (18.18).

At other times, the laws are not explicitly justified on the grounds of harmonious living – instead, the practice being proscribed is asserted to be just wrong: *zimmâ*, a depravity (18.17).¹⁶ Such inculcations are strengthened, first, by ascribing such practices to deviant, ‘foreign’ others from Egypt and Canaan (Lev. 18.3, 24, 27-8; cf. 20.23)¹⁷ and second, by repeatedly asserting their divine source (Lev. 18.1, 4-5, 6, 26, 30; cf. 20.22, 24). For good measure, there is application of evocative language, of the whole land becoming defiled and vomiting out its inhabitants (18.25, 27-8; cf. 20.22). Threat of exclusion is also thrown into the mix (18.29; cf. 20.2-6).¹⁸ This, then, promotes cultural and religio-ethnic boundaries associated with one’s deity and over against others (e.g. Egyptians and Canaanites; see 20.24-6). The prohibitions also, however, apply to minorities in one’s midst (the sojourner, or alien, 18.26; cf. 20.2). All of this is appropriate of incest, which, as discussed, is a cultural category, descriptive of sexual taboo.

Sprinkled into this list of prohibited relatives who, in most cases, might also be persons likely to be members of one’s household,¹⁹ are some other persons off-limits for sex where consanguinity or affinity is not specified: a menstruating woman (18.18; cf. 20.18), another man’s²⁰ woman/wife (18.20) and a male (18.22; cf. 20.13). Regarding the latter law proscribing some kind of sex act with a male, K. Renato Lings (2009) makes the compelling case that the peculiar expression *miškêbê ’iššâ* (‘lyings of a woman’) is likely to be technical. He argues that – not least, given the wider context of 18.22 – it pertains to acts of incest with male relatives, going on to propose a free translation of the verse along the lines of, ‘with a male relative you shall not engage in sexual relationships prohibited with female relatives’ (2009: 246). Also included as abhorrent are sex with an animal (18.23; cf. 20.15-16) and

offering up offspring to Molech, the latter of which specifies no sexual practice (18.21; cf. 20.2).

A number of additional things emerge from Leviticus 18: first, among sexual taboos designated severe are ones we might today call incestuous but also other sexual practices (e.g., sex with a menstruating woman or an animal) and some practices that are not explicitly sexual (e.g. offering one's offspring to Molech), which are abhorred with comparable pitch. Second, what we might call the incest laws are addressed to a male and presuppose, for the most part, heteronormative initiative, where a man seeks sex with a female relative. The one exception is explicit mention of the father who, indeed, heads the list of off-limits relatives. Unless we accept Lings's argument, this example of same-sex incest prohibition is singular. While translations and commentaries may obscure the prohibition of the father, this is the most straightforward translation of the Hebrew (Stiebert 2016: 100–1; cf. Phillips 1980: 40). The inclusion of the father, in prohibitions addressed to a male, is by virtue of being a same-sex prohibition, an outlier, with other male relatives *not* listed (e.g. one's son, grandson, uncle, brother, etc.). This *inclusion* may be surprising, but so is the *exclusion* of other relatives, alongside the son, notably, the widely pointed-out missing daughter (see Stiebert 2016: 52n.19; Fleischman 2011).²¹ Hence, the majority of off-limits family members are female and, by implication, it is most often males who exercise sexual initiative.

Whether one is active or not in a sexual act deemed deviant, punishment applies to *both* parties in the later version of the laws. So if a man is adulterous with a woman (20.10, he is subject, she is object), or he lies with his father's wife (20.11) or daughter-in-law (20.12) or a male/male relative (20.13), or if a man 'takes' a woman and her mother (20.14), both the man *and* the other party are to die. Horrifyingly, there is no attempt here to make any exemption for cases of rape.²² Moreover, in the case of 20.13, there is no indication of the male's age, yet the death penalty applies here, too, which permits the interpretation that a

raped boy-child (more specifically, adopting Lings, a raped male victim of incest) must be punished with death.

Given what has been asserted about the universality of incest taboos, the presence in Leviticus 18 of the prohibitions pertaining to off-limits consanguines and affines is, of itself, no surprise. Given that variations between human societies are also widely reported, alongside a tendency to prohibit close (i.e. first-degree) relatives, it is also, possibly, no surprise that there exist some parallels between Leviticus 18 and current laws in England and Wales concerning permissible and prohibited marriages (Citizens Information 2022). The law in England and Wales provides explicit mention of male equivalents for proscribed females (along the lines of Lings's argument) and, like Leviticus 18, prohibits marriage to one's mother, father, aunt, sister, half-sister, granddaughter, and father's and brother's spouse (Citizens Information 2022). Unlike Leviticus 18, this law explicitly lists also one's offspring (daughter/son) and stepchildren (implied in Lev. 18.17; see McClenney-Sadler 2009), as well as one's niece/nephew, while the niece goes unmentioned in the biblical text.²³ Moreover, it can be noted that the prohibitions of Leviticus have – in times past overtly so – shaped UK-wide incest laws. Calum Carmichael even claims they 'have had greater effect on Western law than any comparable body of biblical laws' (1997: 1; cf. Tadmor 2010: 77). Notwithstanding the biblical inculcations' terse expressions (e.g. 'uncover nakedness', 'uncover the garment of'), the precise nuance of which is lost on us today, and that kinship terminology and structures are anthropologically-specific (hence, some English translations may not capture all Hebrew designations adequately), these may indeed be aptly called incest laws.

Beyond Leviticus – close-kin or incestuous?

Given the emphatic force of the Leviticus prohibitions and the forceful ways in which they drive home their point – with emotively charged expressions (e.g., ‘uncover nakedness’, the vomiting land), the stress on divine authority and (in the case of Leviticus 20) the threat of severe punishments – it is surprising how often these laws are infringed in Hebrew Bible narratives.²⁴ If what is central to an understanding of incest is taboo and illegality centred on prohibited sexual unions and marriage, then the sheer *lack* of explicit abhorrence of sexual unions (if not in every case marriages) proscribed in Leviticus but recounted in these narratives is noteworthy.

Admittedly, consistency is not a strong suit of the Hebrew Bible. Even laws pertaining to incest are not consistent – hence what is prohibited in Lev. 18.16 (namely, sex with one’s brother’s woman/wife) is in some circumstances advised in Deut. 25.5 (the levirate law). The Hebrew Bible is a diverse collection, better thought of as a library than a book, and no doubt written over a large expanse of time, with different compositions aimed at different purposes and audiences; the disjuncture between incest laws and events described in narratives might therefore be, to some extent, understandable. It is nevertheless startling.²⁵ There is quite the line-up. Lot’s two daughters have sex with their drunken father and bear him sons (Gen. 19.30-8).²⁶ Abraham declares that Sarah is his *homopatrioi* half-sister (Gen 20.12).²⁷ Jacob has two wives who are sisters (Genesis 29). Judah (like Lot, unknowingly) impregnates his daughter-in-law, Tamar (Gen. 38.12-30). Moses’ parents, Amram and Jochebed, appear to have been nephew and aunt (Num. 26.57-9). David may have married both his sister (Abigail, cf. 1 Sam. 25.42 and 1 Chron. 2.16) and his mother-in-law (Ahinoam, cf. 1 Sam. 14.50, 25.43 and 2 Sam. 12.8). Amnon rapes his sister Tamar, who beseeches him to marry her (2 Sam. 13.1-19). All of these would constitute violations of the prohibitions in Leviticus 18. True, not all describe what we might call ‘marriages’ (Lot’s daughters and Lot; Judah and Tamar; Amnon and Tamar) but then again, as already mentioned, not only is marriage a

murky concept in the Hebrew Bible, the laws of Leviticus 18 also don't appear to describe something we would today call 'marriage'; instead, what is envisaged here are illicit sexual acts (Tadmor 2010: 78).²⁸ Some of the unions in the narrative, however (Abraham and Sarah; Jacob, Leah and Rachel; David, Abigail and Ahinoam; Amram and Jochebed), do seem to constitute some more formalised and legitimate relationship comparable to what we might call marriage. Moreover, Lot's daughters show no attempt to hide their sons' parentage: hence, they are named Moab ('from the father') and Ben-Ammi ('son of my people'). It could be the case that, alongside incest taboos, there are counter examples of close-kin unions which are not in every case condemned. Arguably, that the Moabites and Ammonites descending from Lot and his daughters go on to be adversaries of Israel may constitute a proleptic slur: i.e. the enemies are descended from 'incestuous bastards' (Bailey 1995: 132).²⁹ Still, with all of these instances in the narratives, the case for acceptable, even legitimate close-kin unions between close blood relatives (if sometimes in exceptional circumstances) is stronger than that for incest (i.e. a taboo, illegitimate union).

There are yet more sexual hints in the Hebrew Bible that involve close relatives. Some pertain to competitions between men.³⁰ This applies to Ham who 'sees' the 'nakedness' of his drunken father, Noah, and tells his brothers (Gen. 9.22). Noah realises that his son Ham had 'done' something to him; this, alongside the allusions to nakedness, covering and a garment (all of which are evocative of incest), has been identified by multiple commentators as implying Ham's attempt to challenge his father's authority by shaming him through some kind of sexual act, be this voyeurism, rape, or castration.³¹ Ishmael's action towards Isaac, which is observed by Sarah and becomes the catalyst for her demand that Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, be evicted (Gen. 21.9-10), could be a further example that is indicative of a sexualised challenge for supremacy. Ishmael is the subject of a verb from the same root that underlies the name Isaac (*ts-ch-q*). While the NRSV translates this action 'playing', the verb

elsewhere has overtones of sexual activity (Gen. 26.8)³² and, possibly, of a sexually suggestive performance met with mockery (Judg. 16.25). Alongside Ham's challenge of his father and Ishmael's of his brother, the in utero action of Jacob against his twin brother Esau, which gains him an advantage, might also be some kind of sexually charged one-upmanship. The expression 'gripping the heel' (Gen. 25.26), which gives Jacob his name, might be a euphemism for something earthier: I have suggested elsewhere a meaning along the lines of 'grabbing by the balls' (2016: 111–12). Notable about all of these examples of power-play between closely related family members is that some kind of sexual action is used in an attempt to gain the upper hand through humiliating a rival. Still, it would seem that sexualised denigration rather than incest specifically is central.

Tamar has (in the terms of the narrative) been defiled and humiliated, but she nevertheless makes a case for marriage to Amnon in a desperate effort to preserve her reputation. Lot's daughters do not conceal sex with their father, but give their sons names that draw attention to their parentage. Notable here is that the sexual couplings prohibited in Leviticus (which we might call incest) are, in the narrative texts, sometimes unusual or exceptional but *not* in effect illegal or taboo and therefore not incestuous.³³ I am left with the impression that the prohibitions of Leviticus try very hard – through strong, evocative language, reinforced with xenophobic amplification, divine inculcation and threats – to instil incest taboo. The narratives, meanwhile, undercut notions of incest. Instead, sexual actions and sometimes unions between related persons (even persons proscribed in Leviticus) are not explicitly or forcefully condemned.

Moving towards the present

Over time, the wobbly picture of incest in the Hebrew Bible appears to have solidified through interpretation. As Rachel Biale makes clear, in rabbinical interpretation incest

became carefully defined and unequivocally located in the realm of taboo (1984: 175–83). The Talmudic tractate Sanhedrin (74a: 12), for instance, refers to the three prohibitions that may never be infringed, where death is preferable to committing any of them: ‘idol worship, forbidden sexual relations, and bloodshed’ (JPS translation). The sexual relations (*giylui arayoth*), meanwhile, are widely interpreted as pertaining to incestuous sexual relations and adultery, affirming the horror with which incest has come to be regarded.³⁴

Acts deemed abhorrent can be further amplified through association with other abhorred acts. This is called *deviance amplification* and can be revealing of sexual mores and attitudes. Hence, male–male sex acts are very widely vilified³⁵ and (including in parts of the Bible) are, like incest, linked with racialized tropes because xenophobia adds punch to and amplifies condemnation.³⁶ Hence, Leviticus 18, a chapter that goes into some detail about whose nakedness one may not uncover because they are ‘near of kin’ (18.6), also includes a prohibition not to ‘lie with a male as with a woman’ (18.22) and attributes such sexual deviance to what ‘they do’ in Egypt and Canaan (18.3). Ironically, however, with narratives once more in discord with legal texts, it is the *foreigners* – Egyptian Pharaoh (Genesis 12) and Abimelech of Gerar (a Philistine, Genesis 20 and 26) who assume and accept that a sister is not a wife, while it is Abraham, the Hebrew forefather, who admits his wife is also his paternal sister (Gen. 20.12).

In my own setting, the present-day United Kingdom, incest certainly holds taboo status. When connected with abuse of one’s own or otherwise related (consanguine or affine) *children*, the horror of incest is further amplified. This is because the perceived deviance of each (incest and child sexual abuse) on its own amplifies further the horror of the other. This is entirely understandable. Incestuous child abuse, like child sexual abuse full stop, represents a profound violation of trust and a shocking exploitation of power, which are known to cause

significant, complex, and long-term harm. Incestuous child sexual abuse is, therefore, among crimes of greatest notoriety, prone to rousing intense outrage and horror.³⁷

In terms of widespread contemporary sexual mores, a trinity of deviance (analogous with that in the Sanhedrin text just cited) might consist of homosexuality, incest, and paedophilia/child sexual abuse. Let me be clear that this does not reflect my own perspective. I have no qualms identifying paedophilia and child sexual abuse as wrong and deviant, just as rape and grooming are wrong and deviant, because of the absence of consent, or of informed consent, and because of the unambiguous presence of power differentials and abuse of power. However, both incest and homosexual sex (between consenting adults, that is) are not in and of themselves classifiable as wrong and deviant in the same way – certainly not in the absence of case-by-case information pertaining to consent and power.³⁸

To be clear, ‘paedophile’ refers to an individual who has persistent sexual feelings or fantasies about children, whereas a child sexual abuser, or offender, is someone who performs abusive actions against a child. Sexual abuse of children may or may not be motivated by paedophilia. Paedophilia is classified as a psychiatric or psychosexual disorder and child sexual abuse and exploitation as a crime.³⁹ As mentioned, xenophobic tropes are used in the Bible to amplify abhorrence of male–male sex acts and incest. In present times, condemnation of both persists, and this condemnation is amplified by associating both with paedophilia and child sexual abuse and exploitation. Hence, incest is nowadays in part condemned on account of much of it constituting intra-familial child abuse and exploitation; meanwhile, one way of whipping up hatred against homosexual persons has been to claim they have a propensity for child grooming and recruitment. However, the claim that either homosexual, or LGBTQ+, individuals are more likely to molest children or otherwise abuse minors than straight-cis persons has no basis in fact and is not substantiated by research; indeed, the claim rests on moral panic and conspiracy theories (Kirchick 2022). Instead, in

the overwhelming majority of cases of incest targeting children and of sexual grooming of minors, perpetrators are male, and targets are female.⁴⁰ Deviance amplification, however, continues to operate within the deviance trinity; for instance, by persistently fanning the notion that homosexual orientation derives from incest or paedophilia and, in turn, brings about paedophilia and child sexual abuse.⁴¹

With regard to child sexual abuse or paedophilia, neither has a prominent presence in the Hebrew Bible (see Michel 2004 and Stiebert 2016: 7–8).⁴² Alastair Hunter speculates (cautiously) that the companion, or partner of one's youth, mentioned repeatedly in prophetic writings, pertains to a pre-pubertal betrothal, 'familiar from many early societies' (2011: 12).⁴³ It is often claimed that girls in 'biblical times' were married shortly after the onset of puberty (Blenkinsopp 1997: 77).⁴⁴ According to the New Testament apocrypha text 'History of Joseph the Carpenter', Mary was betrothed to Joseph at the age of twelve (ch. 3). In the United Kingdom today, this would constitute an illegal child marriage. However, there is nothing in the Bible itself that provides much information about marriage, let alone about a minimum or standard age of marriageability. One suggestion of what might nowadays be called paedophilia is in the extended woman metaphor of Ezekiel 16, a chapter filled with sexual content, including a tirade recounting sexual excess (16.15-34) and an account of brutal, sexualised punishment (16.37-41). At the start of the chapter Jerusalem is personified as an abandoned female infant who is left naked and bare as she grows up and her breasts form and hair grows (16.7). At this point YHWH passes by and determines she is 'at the age for love' (16.8). As Howard Eilberg Schwartz points out, YHWH covering Jerusalem's nakedness and making her his (16.8) is the closest the Bible gets (albeit in a metaphor) 'to a graphic image of God having sexual intercourse' (1994: 113), and with a girl who appears only just to have reached puberty and who may be his adopted daughter.⁴⁵ The case for either marriage or sanctioned sex with a child is possible but weak.

To conclude this brief account of incest, taboo, deviance and the Hebrew Bible, there *are* passages which might strengthen claims as to the universality of incest taboos. Portions of Leviticus 18 and 20 could indeed be cited as ancient examples of incest prohibitions, given their emphasis on listing a variety of consanguine and affine kin as sexually off-limits. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, however, such taboos are not so clear. The case can be made that Ham's sexualised insult of his father, or Lot's daughters' conception of sons with their unconsenting father, or Amnon's rape of his sister Tamar, are all descriptive of inappropriate close-kin sex. Ham is possibly seeking to oust his father and Lot's daughters are, it appears, finding a way to conceive children in a difficult set of circumstances. But incest taboo or shame is not prominent in any of these stories. Ham tells his brothers what he has done; Lot's daughters give their sons names that draw attention to their close-kin-union parentage; Tamar seems to suggest marriage to her rapist brother in a desperate effort to salvage her reputation. None of this smacks of what is at the heart of incest – namely, illegality and ostracizing taboo.

Moving forward in time, such taboo has certainly come to be associated with incest. This is evident in rabbinical interpretation and persists into the present. Solidifying patterns that began to emerge already in antiquity, practices deemed deviant were and are amplified in their deviance by association with other maligned states or practices. Hence, incest in Leviticus is associated with 'foreigners'. In the present, meanwhile, disapproval at incest is heightened by its association with paedophilia and child sexual abuse, while abhorrence at paedophilia and child sexual abuse is, in turn, heightened by association with homosexuality, and vice versa. All of this taken together confirms that perceptions and understandings of sexuality are culturally variable and change over time. The Hebrew Bible is testimony to this.

References

- Afzal, Saima and Johanna Stiebert (2024), *Marriage, Bible, Violence: Intersections and Impacts*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Azzoni, Annalisa (2014), 'Marriage and Divorce: Hebrew Bible', in Julia M. O'Brien (ed. in chief), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies*, 483–8. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bailey, Randall C. (1995), 'They're Nothing but Incestuous Bastards: The Polemical Use of Sex and Sexuality in Hebrew Canon Narratives', in Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (eds), *Reading from This Place, Volume 1: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, 121–38. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Bailey, Randall C. (2010), 'Why Do Readers Believe Lot? Genesis 19 Reconsidered', *Old Testament Essays* 23 (3): 519–48.
- Bailey, Wilma A. (2005), *'You Shall Not Kill' or 'You Shall Not Murder'? The Assault on a Biblical Text*, Wilmington: Michael Glazier.
- Biale, Rachel (1984), *Women and Jewish Law: The Essential Texts, Their History, and Their Relevance for Today*, New York: Schocken.
- Blenkinsopp, Joseph (1997), 'The Family in First Temple Israel', in Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins and Carol Meyers (eds), *Families in Ancient Israel*, 48–103. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- Brown, Donald E. (1991), *Human Universals*, New York: McGraw Hill.
- Carmichael, Calum M. (1997), *Law, Legend, and Incest in the Bible: Leviticus 18–20*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Citizens Information (UK), 'Legal Requirements for Marriage', last updated 14 January 2022. Available online: <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/birth-family->

[relationships/getting-married/legal-requirements-for-marriage/#:~:text=There%20is%20no%20legal%20restriction%20on%20the%20marriage%20of%20first%20cousins.&text=You%20may%20not%20marry%20your,Mother%20or%20father](#) (accessed 19 February 2024).

Cvetkovich, Ann (2003), *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Durham: Duke University Press.

De Doncker, Ellen (2023), 'Incestual Duplication by Female Sex Offenders: Lot's Daughters (Genesis 19:30-38) as Challenge to Typologies and Violent Family-Systems', *Journal for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies*, 5 (1): 16–37.

Dijk-Hemmes, Fokkelien van (1995), 'The Metaphorization of Woman in Prophetic Speech: An Analysis of Ezekiel 23', in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, 244–55, *A Feminist Companion to the Bible* 8, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Eilberg-Schwartz, H. (1994), *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism*, Boston: Beacon.

Ministry of Justice (2013), *Family Law: Information on the Rules*, rev. ed., trans. James Hurst, Stockholm: Ministry of Justice. Available online: <https://www.government.se/contentassets/1e0263a0318e47b4b8515b535925941b/family-law.pdf> (accessed 26 February 2024).

Fleishman, Joseph (2011), *Father-Daughter Relations in Biblical Law*, Bethesda: CDL Press.

Fuchs, Esther (2003), *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman*, JSOTSup 310, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Herman, Judith Lewis ([1981] 2000), *Father-Daughter Incest*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- Hudson, Jackie J. (1991), 'Characteristics of the Incestuous Family', in Catherine Clark Kroeger and James R. Beck (eds), *Women, Abuse, and the Bible: How Scripture Can Be Used to Hurt or Heal*, 70–85, Eugene: Wipf & Stock.
- Huebner, Sabine R. (2007), "'Brother-Sister" Marriage in Roman Egypt: A Curiosity of Humankind or a Widespread Family Strategy?' *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 97: 21–49.
- Hunter, Alastair G. (2011), 'Marriage in the Old Testament'. Available online: <https://www.shilohproject.blog/marriage-in-the-hebrew-bible/> (accessed 19 August 2023).
- Katan, Ursula (2001), 'To Open My Mouth and Speak What I Know', in Danya Ruttenberg (ed.), *Yentl's Revenge: The Next Wave of Jewish Feminism*, 154–160, New York: Seal Press.
- Kirchick, James (31 May 2022), 'The Long, Sordid History of the Gay Conspiracy Theory: Today's right-wing campaign against "groomers" is America's latest moral panic'. *New York Magazine*. Available online: <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2022/05/the-long-sordid-history-of-the-gay-conspiracy-theory.html> (accessed 19 August 2023).
- Köstenberger, Andreas J. (2011), 'The Bible's Teaching on Marriage and Family'. Family Research Council. Available online: <https://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF11J34.pdf> (accessed 8 March 2024).
- Kuloba, Robert W. (2016). "'Homosexuality is Unafrikan and Unbiblical": Examining the Ideological Motivations to Homophobia in Sub-Saharan Africa – The Case Study of Uganda', *Journal of Theology in Southern Africa* 154: 6–27.
- Lazic, Marija (19 May 2023), '21 Alarming Online Predators Statistics', LegalJobs. Available online: <https://legaljobs.io/blog/online-predators->

[statistics/#:~:text=Children%20and%20Grooming%20Statistics%20Overview&text=I
n%202021%2C%20grooming%20cases%20against,the%20most%20common%20gro
oming%20methods](#) (accessed 19 August 2023).

Lev, Sarra (2017), “Dipping a Finger in Honey”: Sense Making in the Face of Violent Texts’, in Amy Kalmanofsky (ed.), *Sexual Violence and Sacred Texts*, 53–74, Feminist Studies in Religion, Indianapolis: Dog Ear Publishing.

Lings, K. Renato (2009), ‘The “Lyings” of a Woman: Male – Male Incest in Leviticus 18.22?’ *Theology and Sexuality* 15 (2): 231–50.

McClenney-Sadler, Madeline (2009), ‘For God’s Sake, Mommie, Help! The Mother-Daughter Dyad in Leviticus 18 and the Biblical Directive for Equity in the Family’, in Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan and Tina Pippin (eds), *Mother Goose, Mother Jones, Mommie Dearest: Biblical Mothers and their Children*, 9–22, Atlanta: SBL Press.

Meyers, Carol (1988), *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Michel, Andreas (2004), ‘Sexual Violence against Children in the Bible’, trans. J. Bowden, in Regina Ammicht Quinn, Hille Haker and Maureen Junker-Kenny (eds), *The Structural Betrayal of Trust*, 51–60, Concilium, London: SCM.

Murdock, G. P. (1945), ‘The Common Denominator of Cultures’, in Ralph Linton (ed.), *The Science of Man in the World Crisis*, 123–42, New York: Columbia University Press.

Nyabera, Fred and Taryn Montgomery, eds (2007), *Tamar Campaign: Contextual Bible Study Manual on Gender-Based Violence*, Nairobi: FECCLAHA. Available online: <https://jliflc.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/tamar-campaign-contextual-bible-study-manual-english-version-final-complete.pdf> (accessed 8 March 2024).

Phillips, Anthony (1980), ‘Uncovering the Father’s Skirt’, *VT* 30: 38–43.

- Pusey, Anne (2004), 'Inbreeding Avoidance in Primates', in Arthur P. Wolf and William H. Durham (eds), *Inbreeding, Incest, and the Incest Taboo: The State of Knowledge at the Turn of the Century*, 61–75, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- RAINN (n.d.). 'Children and Teens: Statistics'. Available online: <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/children-and-teens#> (accessed 19 August 2023).
- Rapoport, Rabbi Chaim (2004), *Judaism and Homosexuality: An Authentic Orthodox View*, London: Vallentine Mitchell.
- 'Resources' (n.d.), The Shiloh Project. Available online: <https://www.shilohproject.blog/resources/> (accessed 6 March 2024).
- Rooke, Deborah W. (2009), 'The Bare Facts: Gender and Nakedness in Leviticus 18', in Deborah W. Rooke (ed.), *A Question of Sex? Gender and Difference in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*, 20–38, Hebrew Bible Monographs 14, Sheffield: Phoenix.
- Sacco, Lynn (2009), *Unspeakable: Father-Daughter Incest in American History*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Scholz, Susanne (2010), *Sacred Witness: Rape in the Hebrew Bible*, Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Stiebert, Johanna (2013), *Fathers & Daughters in the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stiebert, Johanna (2016), *First-Degree Incest and the Hebrew Bible: Sex in the Family*, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.
- Stiebert, Johanna (2024), 'Eve and Psychoanalytic Approaches', in Caroline Blyth and Emily Colgan (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Eve*, 411–23, London, New York: Routledge.

Stone, L. S. (forthcoming). 'The Bible and the Violence of Translation: The Sordid Case of Ezekiel 16 and the Suppression of the Rape of Jerusalem', in Christopher Greenough, Johnathan Jodamus, Mmapula Kebaneilwe and Johanna Stiebert (eds), *The Bible and Violence*, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.

Tadmor, Naomi (2010), *The Social Universe of the English Bible: Scripture, Society, and Culture in Early Modern England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Trible, Phyllis (1984), *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Philadelphia: Fortress.

¹ Bailey (2005) makes this case powerfully and persuasively with reference to the dominant tendency in Bible translations since the latter half of the twentieth century to render the sixth commandment 'you shall not murder' (Exod. 20:13; Deut. 5:17), as opposed to the earlier (and, she argues, more accurate) 'you shall not kill'. Bailey asserts that this translation has contributed to justifying the taking of human life in so-called 'just' wars and by means of the death penalty. Both, in Bailey's own US context, have received strong support from right-wing Protestant sectors with tendencies to literalist readings of the Bible.

² Hudson's chapter on incest in a book on the Bible and abuse opens with, 'Incest is a human tragedy' and associates it with 'shattering of basic trust' and with trauma (1991: 70–1). Herman's own work also incorporates close reading of biblical texts (e.g. [1981] 2000: 60–1).

³ For a list of resources on the topic of how work on the Bible (and religious traditions incorporating the Bible) intersects with topics of gender-based, including sexual and incestuous abuse, see the 'Resources' tab on the Shiloh Project website here: <https://www.shilohproject.blog/resources/>. This shows a steady increase of scholarly focus on topics of abuse and trauma. Concerning the use of the Bible for healing, the work of the Ujamaa Centre in South Africa, founded in 1989, is especially important – above all, the Tamar Campaign, named after the story of Amnon's rape of his sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13) (see Nyabera and Montgomery 2007).

⁴ For details, see Tribble (1984: 37–63) and Stiebert (2013: 59–64).

⁵ Some commentators are so uncomfortable with, or find so aberrant, what Roman census records appear clearly to state regarding legal (i.e. close-kin, not incestuous) sibling marriages, that they propose convoluted explanations to account for them. For example, Huebner (2007) argues for men without legitimate biological sons adopting males for the purpose of marrying them to their daughters. Rather like cousin marriage in some parts of the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Num. 36.1–12), as well as some historical settings (e.g. upper-class society in Victorian England) and parts of the contemporary world (e.g. rural Pakistan), this was or is a strategy to maintain wealth within the family.

⁶ Swedish law in some cases permits marriage between half-siblings, or non-consanguine siblings. In any case, permission must first be sought from 'the county administrative board' (see Ministry of Justice 2013: 10).

⁷ For examples of lists of human universals that include incest taboos, see Murdock (1945) and Brown (1991).

⁸ Sigmund Freud has argued in some of his writings (e.g. *Totem and Taboo, Moses and Monotheism*) for the idea that formative traumatic and repressed memories can shape development of the psyche over generations. I discuss this more fully elsewhere (Stiebert 2024: 412 and n.8).

⁹ My primary focus is on Leviticus 18, which offers the fullest set of what might be characterized as incest prohibitions. Another example is in Leviticus 20, with briefer mentions in Deut. 22.30, 27.20-3 and Ezek. 22.10-11. For more detail, see Stiebert (2016: 45–87).

¹⁰ See Afzal and Stiebert (2024: 40; cf. Stiebert 2016: 8n.24). On the slipperiness of translation into English marriage terminology, see Tadmor (2010: 50–81, with reference to incest, 76–9).

¹¹ There is female sexual initiative in the bestiality law (Lev. 18.23; cf. 20.16). Moreover, if Stone (forthcoming) is correct that both to ‘see’ and to ‘uncover’ nakedness refer to deviant sexual intercourse, then a sister appears to take active part in sibling incest (Lev. 20.17). At Lev. 20.18 a menstruating woman ‘uncovers’ her source (of blood), which suggests her agency in an act considered deviant.

¹² The expression for this is peculiar and may have a very precise meaning now lost, or, at any rate, hard to capture in translation. It consists of a pairing of words *šer b^etsarô*, each of which translates into English as ‘flesh’. Their meanings are distinguished in BDB, with one pertaining to ‘inner flesh’, near the bones, which is filled with blood, and the second to the flesh that is just under the skin (see Stiebert 2016: 52). This could mean very near and slightly less near (blood?) relatives. Again, however, it is unclear what this actually means: is a half-sibling closer than a cousin, a step-parent closer than an aunt or uncle, or vice versa? Another, possibly technical Hebrew expression suggestive of incest combines, once more, a verb from the root *g-l-h* (to uncover) but this time with the object *k^enep ‘abîw* (‘the garment of his father’) (Deut. 22.30 [MT 23.1]). For parallels from other Jewish texts, see Stiebert (2016: 64n.54).

¹³ Biale adds that the illicit nature conveyed with this expression is emphasized in that the apparent opposite ‘*kisuy arayot* (‘covering the nakedness’) ... appears in two passages in the prophets as a synonym for marriage (Ezek. 16.8 and Hosea 2.11)’ (1984: 177).

¹⁴ In terms of what is reflected in and by the Hebrew Bible, it appears that, whereas women ‘belong’ to men (first their fathers and sometimes also brothers, then their husbands, who have exclusive sexual access to them), there was no such restriction for men who might have sexual access to multiple women (i.e. multiple wives, as well as enslaved women) in their household (Azzoni 2014: 483).

¹⁵ In Hebrew a single word (*‘iššâ*) translates both English ‘woman’ and ‘wife’. Translational choices can influence understanding and also impose notions of marriage and, hence, respectability, where these may be absent or at best implicit (see Afzal and Stiebert 2024: 6).

¹⁶ On *zimmâ* and its possible associations with incest, see Fleishman (2011: 150–1). Both Lev. 18.23 (with reference to a woman committing bestiality) and 20.12 refer to *tebel*, elsewhere a word meaning ‘confusion’ (from the root *bll*, as in the Babel story in Gen. 11.9) but in the JPS at 20.12 it is translated ‘incest’

(<https://www.sefaria.org/Leviticus.20.12?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>). Also making an appearance alongside *zimmâ* and *tebel* is the word *tô ‘ebâ* (18.22 and 20.13, of a man having sex with a male ‘as with a woman’), translated ‘abomination’ (NRSV) and ‘an abhorrent thing’ (JPS).

¹⁷ It is not uncommon to ascribe sexual practices deemed deviant as also constituting something that maligned racialized others do. In these ways, sexual taboos are weaponised in xenophobic ways. This applies both to antisemitic tropes and anti-Black racist tropes, e.g. of Jewish or Black men raping white women in such propaganda films as *Jud Süß* (1940) and

The Birth of a Nation (1915). The designation ‘sodomy’, used of criminalized sex (such as in the ‘sodomy laws’, introduced and imposed in many parts of the world through British colonialism) also derives from sex deemed deviant and ascribed to citizens of a place, Sodom (Genesis 19).

¹⁸ Leviticus 20 takes things up a notch and, alongside cutting off from one’s people (20.3, 17-18), repeatedly prescribes punishment (20.19-20), childlessness (20.20-1), and the death penalty (e.g. 20.2), including for uncovering the nakedness of a relative (i.e. for what appears to be incest, e.g. 20.11-12). Moreover, the forms of death penalty in this chapter are various (stoning, 20.2, 27; unspecified putting to death, 20.9-13, 15-16; burning to death, 20.14) and there is also repeated mention here of bloodguilt (20.9, 11-13, 16).

¹⁹ The one explicit exception is the sister or half-sister who may have been born abroad but who is nevertheless proscribed (18.9). Maimonides already recognizes both the risk and impulse for a man to have sex with a member of his household and the taboo and shame of incest (see Biale 1984: 180–2). On using Leviticus 18 alongside archaeological evidence to reconstruct family-based households, see Meyers (1988: 133–8).

²⁰ The word *‘amîtkâ* is variously translated, as ‘your neighbour’ (JPS) and ‘your kinsman’ (NRSV). It seems to designate someone who lives nearby, who might also be one’s relative (be this a close, or more distant one, a consanguine or affine).

²¹ The missing daughter in the Hebrew Bible prohibitions is sometimes interpreted as a tacit form of permission (i.e. the suggestion that fathers are sexually entitled to their daughters), e.g. see Herman ([1981] 2000: 60–1). Others firmly reject this suggestion, e.g. McClenney-Sadler (2009).

²² The narrative of Amnon’s rape of his sister Tamar (2 Samuel 13) acknowledges that rape occurs within families. Tamar, albeit unusually, is depicted by the narrator with sympathy. Her efforts to resist Amnon and her inability to fight him off are made explicit in the narrative.

²³ Biale notes that, while Halakhah (Jewish law) does not prohibit marriage between a man and his niece, the law of many modern countries, including Israel, does (1984: 179).

²⁴ Indeed, the case could be made that this doubling down on horror and deterrents indicates not so much that the proscribed actions are taboo as that the proscribed actions were a profound temptation and widely occurrent.

²⁵ Carmichael (1997) makes a quirky, if ultimately implausible, case for Leviticus 18–20 constituting a priestly commentary expressing disapproval at unions deemed incestuous in the Genesis and Exodus narratives.

²⁶ I have discussed this story fully elsewhere (2016: 156–65). All other narratives mentioned here are also discussed at more length in my earlier monograph (2016).

²⁷ Half-siblings share either a father (*homopatrioi*) or a mother (*homomatrioi*). In some cultures, including those reflected in the Hebrew Bible, indications are that *homomatrioi* siblings are more closely related or more bonded (see Stiebert 2016: 166n.175, 168). This might be connected, too, to *homomatrioi* also being milk siblings, unions between whom are considered incestuous in some cultures.

²⁸ Tadmor also notes that, while Leviticus focuses on illicit sex and frames the prohibitions ‘within the framework of the polygamous and patriarchal household’, early English translations, variously and selectively translating *‘iššâ* as ‘wife’ or ‘woman’, connect the biblical prohibitions ‘with Christian – and thereby monogamous – notions of marriage’ that are imposed on the Hebrew (2010: 78–9).

²⁹ This harks back, too, to the xenophobic slurs on Egyptians and Canaanites in Leviticus 18. There is a bit of ‘if they do it, it’s incest; if we do it, it’s close-kin union’.

³⁰ The narrative of Amnon's rape of his sister Tamar has also been interpreted as being centrally about fraternal competition between Amnon and Absalom (e.g. Tribble 1984: 38; Fuchs 2003: 201–5).

³¹ Such suggestions are recorded already in rabbinical discussion (Sanhedrin 70a). For more detail and a summary of the arguments, see Stiebert (2016: 104–9).

³² While BDB proposes a meaning denoting Isaac's 'conjugal caresses' with Rebekah, Scholz sees the verb as suggestive of something 'rape prone' (2010: 91).

³³ More could be said about the Hebrew Bible and close-kin union in mythology (e.g. in Gen. 2–3, the story of Adam and Eve, who can be considered as either parent–child or siblings), in metaphor (e.g. God's apparent 'taking' of his adoptive daughter in Ezekiel 16) and in poetic imagery (e.g. Isa. 62.4–5 where sons espouse their mother), but space does not permit this. Other early Jewish writings, such as Jubilees, make plain, without any hint of horror, what the biblical text suggests by omission: namely that Cain had children (e.g. Enoch) with his sister (named in Jubilees as Awan), as did Seth whose sister-wife is named in Jubilees as Azura (4.9–11).

³⁴ In the course of research for this chapter, I came across an entry in Wikipedia for the infamous king Jehoiakim (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jehoiakim>). It claims that he is remembered in rabbinical tradition as exceptionally depraved and for committing incest with his mother, daughter-in-law, and stepmother. Yet, when I tried to find textual evidence for this, I found only general references to Jehoiakim's 'gross and unspeakable misdeeds' (Leviticus Rabbah xix.6) and, in Josephus, to his 'wicked disposition' and readiness 'to do mischief' (*Ant.* 5.2.16), as well as to his ignominious death, with no burial (*Ant.* 6.3.16). I could, not, however, find verification of references to incest with any specific close family members. It seems possible, however, that where there *are* charges of gross indecency, incest is one of the first and most notorious crimes to spring to mind – just as it springs to mind where 'forbidden sexual relations' are mentioned in Sanhedrin.

³⁵ Gevisser, giving examples from all over the world, evocatively depicts same-sex sexuality as drawing a 'pink line' dividing swathes of the world. He shows, too, that most vitriol and harshest criminal repercussions pertain to male-male sex-acts. This is confirmed in parts of conservative Judaism. Hence, Rapoport mentions that male homosexuality is 'at least in theory ... a capital crime, and is also subject to the strictures of *arayot* – they are forbidden even if human life is at risk' (2004: 105). Female–female sex, whether abhorred or incestuous, neither or both, in the Bible and its reception, receives less attention. For a full discussion, including possible reasons, see Stiebert (2016: 114–32). Alleging that same-sex sexual relations pertain to deviant foreigners is not new. To give two examples, the rabbis associated female–female sex with Egyptian women (Rapoport 2004: 148n.25) and homosexuality is often termed a 'Western' import in anti-homosexual polemic from African settings, e.g. see Kuloba (2016).

³⁶ Bailey discusses fully the links between male–male sex and xenophobia (2010) and between incest and xenophobia (1995).

³⁷ When incest is, or is depicted as, consensual and between adults, it can be a source of intense and prurient sensationalism and titillation, again on account of its taboo – hence, its regular presence in tabloids and soap operas (Stiebert 2016: 7–12).

³⁸ Complementarian writers are prone to making blanket assertions about homosexuality (the sexual orientation) and/or homosexual sex-acts being deviant and dangerous. To give one typical example, Köstenberger (2011: 10) cites 'homosexuality' as one of the six impediments to God's order and the family. He mentions also polygamy, divorce, adultery, sterility and what he classifies as 'gender role confusion'. Notably absent are incest, child abuse and domestic violence.

³⁹ I am using ‘paedophilia’ and ‘child sexual abuse’ as blanket terms to refer to sexual feelings for and to sexual abuse of minors. Indeed, the reality is more complex with hebephilia and ephebophilia, referring to sexual feelings for pubescent and late-adolescent minors, respectively.

⁴⁰ On incest, see the careful research of clinical psychologist Herman ([1981] 2000) and of historian Sacco (2009). On grooming, see Lazic (2023), and on statistics for child incest and grooming, see RAINN (n.d.).

⁴¹ The latter, as mentioned, is unsubstantiated. Concerning the former, the fascinating, if (for me) very challenging, queer reading by Cvetkovich embraces rather than resists links between, on the one hand, queer and lesbian sex and, on the other, sexual abuse and incest. Aware of arguments from ‘the specter of causality’, Cvetkovich asks, ‘But why can’t saying that “sexual abuse causes homosexuality” just as easily be based on the assumption that there’s something right, rather than something wrong, with being lesbian or gay?’ She goes on ‘to claim lesbianism as one of the *welcome* effects of sexual abuse’, stressing ‘I introduce the word *queer* to suggest the unpredictable connections between sexual abuse and its effects, to name a connection while refusing determination or causality’ (2003: 89–90). Speaking up against causality, Cvetkovich approvingly quotes from Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina*, which she considers a canonical text ‘in the incest archive’ (2003: 105): ‘If people really believed that rape made lesbians, and brutal fathers made dykes, wouldn’t they be more eager to do something about it?’ (2003: 107).

⁴² Michel (2004) makes the compelling case that Num. 31.18, where Midian girls (*hattap banašîm*, ‘the young among women/females’) who have ‘not known the lying of a male’ (presumably meaning, who have not been sexually penetrated by a male) become the spoils of war for Israelite men, legitimizes sexual abuse of girl children. Van Dijk Hemmes (1995) points to Ezek. 23.3 as descriptive of the sexual abuse of the metaphorical girls. Some have seen evidence for incestuous sexual abuse in the *absence* of explicit mention of a daughter in the list of close kin in Leviticus 18 (e.g. Herman [1981] 2000: 60–1). Still, there is all up relatively little in the Hebrew Bible that points to sex with anyone not of child-bearing age – which cannot, of course, be taken to mean that child abuse did not occur in the societies which shaped the biblical texts. On sexual abuse of young children and the Talmud, see Lev (2017).

⁴³ The partner of one’s youth appears in Prov. 2.17 and 5.18–19, as well as in biblical prophetic texts (Isa. 54.6; Jer. 2.2, 3.4; Ezek. 16.60; Joel 1.8; Mal. 2.14–15).

⁴⁴ Blenkinsopp does not use the expression ‘biblical times’, but his claim is in the form of a general statement and part of a chapter focused on Israel of the First Temple period. Emphasis on procreation, as derived from Gen 1.28, seems sometimes to lie behind the suggestion that a girl is marriageable as soon as she attains sexual maturity – that is, reaches puberty.

⁴⁵ On Ezekiel 16 as a possible father-daughter incest text see Stiebert (2016: 147–51).